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United for Quality Care

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Cynthia Johnson, PCA, New Haven
District 1199 New England
Before the Appropriations Committee

Good Afternoon Senator Osten, Representative Walker and members of the Committee, my name is Cynthia Johnson. I live in New Haven and have worked for the last five years caring for my daughter as her Personal Care Attendant (PCA). I come before you today to ask that you give PCA's like myself the funding we need for livable wages and benefits.

I love my daughter and have cared for her for her entire life; however, a series of events that began in 2015 led me to become her PCA. My daughter Anissa, lives with a rare case of epilepsy syndrome which causes her to experience a variety of seizures, one of which are known as drop seizures. In 2015, Anissa was walking to the store when she experienced a drop seizure and fell to the ground. When she hit the ground the doctors say she hit her face on the ground so hard that she broke her jaw in three places. She also had most of her teeth dislodged. Not broken, but removed from her gums by the force of the impact.

Recovering from this fall took almost two years. There were complications with the wire they put in her jaw, and my daughter was forced to eat only liquids for many months. My daughter lost a lot of weight in that time, dropping from 156 lbs to 93 lbs in nine months. In addition to her battle with epilepsy, my daughter struggles with bouts of vertigo as well as PTSD stemming from this fall.

It was during my daughter's recovery that I decided I had to stay home to care for her full time, and if it were not for the Medicaid waiver program I would not have been able to get paid for doing so. It has meant a lot to me to be able to stay home and care for my daughter, and to know her needs are being met. However, as a PCA working in the state of Connecticut, I am deeply saddened and angered that the needs of PCAs like me are not met.

PCAs are professional caregivers. We go to work every day to ensure our consumers have the care they depend on, yet we are paid poverty wages and provided barely any benefits. After negotiations we were given \$18.25 per hour instead of the \$20 we asked for, but because of inflation we are still where we began. PCAs like me live paycheck to paycheck. We do not earn enough to save anything, which is very stressful. We do not earn enough to save for the important life purchases, such as buying a house, and instead are forced to keep the tightest of budgets, sometimes having to choose between paying a bill and feeding our families.

On top of our inadequate wages, we are not offered the types of benefits others are offered through their job. We are not given any sort of retirement plan. We were denied health insurance, and instead promised a stipend. But a year later even that has not been delivered. Additionally we were not notified until three days before the deadline that we had to apply for it. We do our best to save pennies and hope it is enough when we are old and sick to live off of. That is wrong.

Connecticut must do more to meet the needs of Home Care workers. Too many PCAs had to go to bread line/food banks, shelters, had to decide whether to feed their families or pay bills! Where's the resources? When your work is to love and care for others, there needs to be a system in place that will love and care for us as well! We are an important part of the long term care infrastructure in CT, and must be treated as such. The work we do allows people to live and receive care in their own homes with dignity.

Thank you for your time.